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REVIEW | BOOK

The hazy story of a real spy

MASTER SPY: A True Story of Allied Espionage in Bolshevik Russia, by Edward Van Der Rhoer. Scribners. 260 pp. \$14.95.

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The real-life fact is that spies are known to their protective governments, no matter what the latter say. Western nations tried from the beginning, though not with solid perseverance, to undermine the Bolsheviks, to destroy their revolution, not just by force but by infiltration.

This is the story of one of the infiltrators, a British agent named Sidney George Reilly, who did exist. In fact, Ian Fleming is said to have invented James Bond after reading about Reilly in the archives of the intelligence services.

Reilly, of course, was not his name. He was a Russian, or perhaps a Pole, who purported to detest Marx and Lenin. Edward Van Der Rhoer, himself an espionage expert, tells us that Reilly was probably born Sigmund Georgievich Rosenblum, but Reilly lied about that, as about everything else.

No one in the West knows when or how he got into intelligence. He was indubitably a freelance spy who worked for (probably) several countries, (probably) simultaneously.

What is known is that the British sent him to Russia in 1918 to try to keep the Bolsheviks in the war or to topple them in favor of a government that would continue to fight.

As we know, Reilly did not succeed. He was, however, a witness to and sometime participant in the diplomatic maneuverings of the English, French and Americans in Moscow and Petrograd. The three major allies were not prepared to recognize the Soviet government. But many of their representatives on the spot favored recognition on grounds that Lenin and Trotsky were the only people tough enough to control Russia and that recognition might persuade them not to sign a separate peace with Germany. The in-fighting between the pros and cons was intense. Reilly was a con, or at least he said so.

In 1918 the Soviets did not really have a grip on the country, and it was easy to move around. Reilly ostensibly spent his time recruiting men for his ostensible planned overthrow of the regime. There was a minor Allied intervention at Archangel and there were anti-Soviet uprisings in which Reilly was involved, but there are questions about those. Van Der Rhoer traces Reilly's movements through these abortive coups d'etat; he opines that these failures reassured the Soviets about their ability to succeed, and probably were partly responsible for the bloodbath that followed.

When most of the Allied representatives left, Reilly went underground and continued his putative efforts to subvert the Soviet government. Narrow escapes, safe houses, murdered colleagues, terrorism and treachery. It's heady stuff. But it, too, failed.

Van Der Rhoer finally asks why, after giving us a straight-forward account of what is on the record. His conclusion is that Reilly was and always had been a double agent, another in the sad string of British spies who served two masters.

He believes that Reilly was allowed to escape Russia, to go back to London, where he lived the life of Riley, gambling, womanizing and showing off. British Intelligence was worried about his notoriety — but not worried enough. In 1925 they sent him back to Russia, where Reilly "disappeared," probably into the OGPU.

All one can say about this episode is that, like most spy stories, it is disturbing.

O/SI
Chore